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Physical Lab Security - Before and After World War II

By Angie Piccolo, Archivist, [National Security Research Center](#)

Badges, checkpoints, security clearances and a fence that completely surrounded the town. From Day 1 — and for nearly 80 years since then — security at the Lab has been paramount.

Physical security during World War II was important to maintaining the secrecy of the Manhattan Project, the government's wartime effort to create the atomic bomb. In a perceived race against Nazi Germany to do so, physicist **J. Robert Oppenheimer**, the Lab's first director, and **General Leslie Groves**, head of the Manhattan Project, needed a secluded place to build the clandestine Lab.

They ultimately chose the mesa on top of the Pajarito Plateau based on:

- The small number of inhabitants ([a boys' boarding school](#) and a few homesteaders) there;
- Its isolation;
- Its distance from the coast and large cities;
- It was easily protected.

Guarding science

A nearly 10-foot barbed wire fence was built to surround the Lab's technical areas and adjacent community, where Lab staff and their families lived. Military personnel guarded the entrances to the town 24 hours a day, seven days a week, checking gate passes and controlling who could enter the town.

Travel restrictions were imposed on scientists and their families, monitoring who was able to leave. For example, residents had to register travel plans and present their passes at the guarded entry gates in order to travel down the hill to Santa Fe.

To gain physical access to the technical areas and classified knowledge of the project, scientists underwent extensive background checks and were assigned color-coded badges indicating their need-to-know and clearance level:

- White round buttons with blue passes, which were the highest level of clearance, for the scientific and administrative staff and their secretaries.
- Round bronze metal buttons and white passes for steam plant operators.
- White oblong buttons with letters and temporary passes for official visitors.

The strict security measures, however, were not completely foolproof. In a documentary interview, **Richard Feynman**, a Lab physicist, Nobel Prize winner and notorious prankster, [recalled](#): "There would be big holes in the outside fence that a man could walk through standing up and I used to enjoy going out through the gate and coming in through the fence hole and going out through the gate again and in through the fence hole until the poor sergeant at the gate would gradually realized this guy's come outta the place without going in once."

Post-World War II

At the [end of World War II](#), the Manhattan Project and the town of Los Alamos were no longer a secret — the two Los Alamos-created atomic bombs had been deployed, helping end history's deadliest conflict on September 2, 1945.

The physical security implemented during the war evolved in order to meet the changing needs of the Lab's nuclear scientific research. For example, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which took over control of the Laboratory in 1947, retained the surrounding fence but replaced the military personnel with civilian guards to secure the entrance gates.

In the months after the end of WWII, travel restrictions for the residents were removed and access to the town was relaxed. Nonresidents were now allowed to enter the town, but only by invitation. Also, residents could now take photographs in town, although still not within any of the Lab's technical areas. Meanwhile, the Lab's main technical area moved to the south mesa because more space was needed for new permanent buildings.

Cold War years

Guarded checkpoints and security clearances remained as scientific nuclear research and weapons development continued into the Cold War (1947-1989). Additionally, badges were still required in order to enter into the technical areas.

"There weren't dramatic changes in security clearance policies or badging after World War II except for cosmetic changes to the badges themselves," said LANL Historian Ellen McGehee, adding, "We still have classification categories based on 'need to know' and, then as now, people were vetted following a personnel security review process."

The AEC considered removing fences and gates surrounding the town in the early 1950s, but hesitated due to the ongoing development of the hydrogen bomb and the tense nature of the Cold War. Meanwhile, Los Alamos' sister laboratories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Hanford, Washington, became more open in 1953, with a fence surrounding Oak Ridge coming down four years earlier in 1949.

Eventually, the government decided that it was too expensive to maintain the gates into Los Alamos, although some of the town residents resisted, arguing for the "safety of children and grandmothers," according to the book *Inventing Los Alamos: The Growth of an Atomic Community* by Jon Hunner.

The fences, however, came down on February 18, 1957. The main guard station was replaced by a drive-in burger restaurant for a period of time. Los Alamos, a secret city for more than two years and a closed city for 15 years, was now open to the public.

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Images:



Caption: Badge photo of Richard Feynman, a Lab physicist, future Nobel Prize winner and notorious prankster. Feynman liked to trick the security guards at the gate.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eirliiZfW6AScT-WbNhFhtk4ewMD0V73/view?usp=sharing>



Caption: This badge photo of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Lab's first director shows Oppenheimer's white round button, which indicated he had the highest level of security clearance.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1mlkxpvAdqwaHsG9zzYslcZzkQJE6rN93>



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15BvM1xcp-KDcHMrMUBsuWHGYox13Nomk/view?usp=sharing>

Caption: Even after the end of World War II, security remained paramount. This photo from 1951 is part of the collections of the National Security Research Center, the Lab's classified library that also curates unclassified legacy materials.

1. WHITE ROUND BUTTONS with blue passes signed by J. R. Oppenheimer and Colonel J. M. Harman:

The scientific staff
The administrative staff
Secretaries in the Director's office
Document room secretaries
Secretaries to the scientific staff

2. ROUND BUTTONS WITH COLORED BORDERS and blue passes:

All other employees

3. BROWN OBLONG BUTTONS WITH LETTERS and white passes :

All temporary employees

4. WHITE OBLONG BUTTONS WITH LETTERS and pass machine passes:

Scientific and administrative visitors

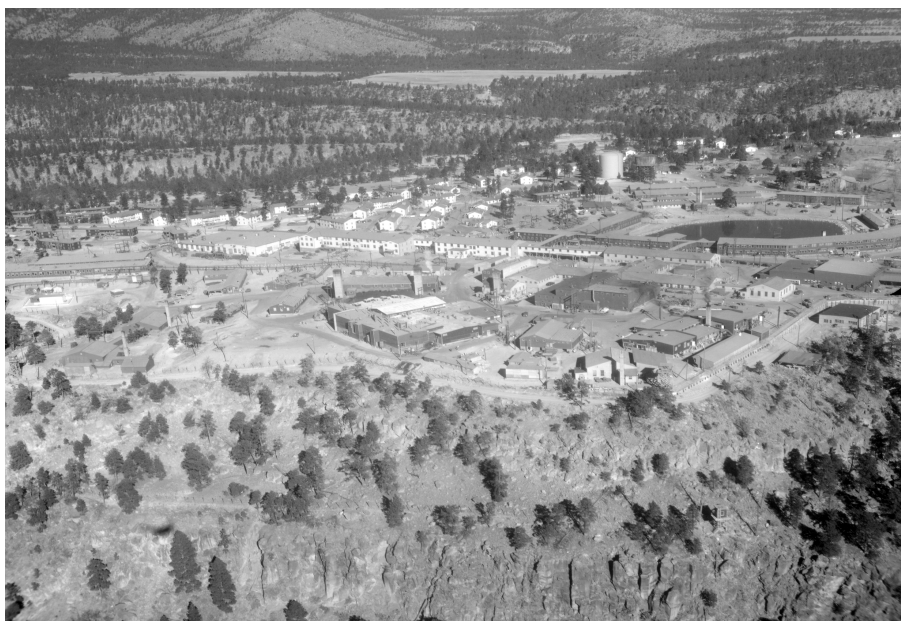
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y-KzcBZzsYZQsDdqKVJw-cqt_L4EWHiL/view?usp=sharing

Caption: This schedule from the wartime Lab (1943-1945) listed the different categories of badges, based on staff's security designations. These Manhattan Project records are part of the collections of the Lab's National Security Research Center.



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GionsLkWPDrzZEGbNoKdhtf9xyPSI2d8/view?usp=sharing>

Caption: A nearly 10-foot-tall wire fence, shown here in 1947, surrounded both the town of Los Alamos and the technical areas of the Laboratory during and immediately after World War II. Passes were required to enter the town, while additional badging was required in order to enter the technical areas. The fence surrounding the town of Los Alamos came down in 1957.



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C5RtFpEG8o5XkbOTr-HSUiFZxYrDu3aa/view?usp=sharing>

Caption: Lab Director and Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, needed a secluded place to build a laboratory to create the world's first atomic bombs. Secrecy and security were paramount; they ultimately chose Los Alamos.